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ABSTRACT

Myths about Africa are an inevitable outgrowth of a fundamental set of cultural assumptions about race and civilization that have been building in Western culture for at least four hundred years. The old African mythology, which consisted of crude, uncomplimentary stereotypes has been replaced by a new mythology which is much more insidious and detrimental to an understanding of Africa. The new is tougher to combat because it appears objective, is supported by evidence, and is constantly reinforced by the mass media. After a brief discussion of a few of the more notable old myths, the paper discusses and critiques the elements of the new mythology and its foundations. Once teachers recognize the elements of the new mythology, they can study and correct them in an effort to help their students see Africa as it is, rather than as a mythical structure suggests it is. (Author/RM)

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In the Space Age it has become commonplace for our more sophisticated citizenry to identify and de-bunk a number of Old Myths about Africa. The better newspapers and magazines, the mass media -- and social studies teachers by the thousands--have learned, if they were not already aware, that Tarzan and Frank Buck have done Africa a disservice. Hence it now fashionable to start the modern learning-about-Africa process by sweeping away the crude, uncomplimentary stereotypes, handed down to us from centuries of slave trading, ignorance about Africa, adventurous explorers, and the latter day myth-disseminators of Hollywood, that constitute the Old Mythology.

What is generally less well known is that a New Mythology has quietly begun to replace the Old. The New Mythology is far more insidious and detrimental to our understanding of Africa than the Old ever was. The New is much tougher to combat, because it appears objective and supported by evidence. And it is constantly buttressed by authoritative reportage and analysis in widely distributed books and films and by constant repetition in every quadrant of our educational and communication systems.

This African Mythology -- both Old and New -- is an inevitable outgrowth of a fundamental set of cultural assumptions about race and civilization that have been building in Western culture for at least four hundred years. These assumptions are deeply buried, often unconscious. They are elusive and subtle. And they are consequently highly resistant to change. Yet they are beginning to change, as a concommitant of a broad attitudinal and racial revolution in American society. We can all give thanks for our possible ultimate deliverance from them.

The teacher who is committed to helping to free young minds from the deeply engrained, disfunctional stereotypes that impede true learning will find in African studies a challenge and an opportunity. The first step in seizing this opportunity is recognizing the elements of the New Mythology, and its subliminal foundations.

The foundations upon which the New Mythology rests are the same fundamental assumptions about race and culture which supported the Old: Africans became slaves, slaves are inferior, therefore Africans are inferior. Africans are Blacks, Blacks are inferior. Superiority is characterized by power, scientific knowledge, and advanced technology, the inferiority of Africans is proven by their weakness in resisting enslavement and colonial conquest, by their lack of scientific knowledge, and by the low state of their technology. The worth of a civilization is correlated with its technology; Africans have a primitive technology and thus a primitive civilization.

These assumptions are cited for illustrative purposes; they could be amplified and expanded almost endlessly. The moment some of them are held up to the cold glare of modern American thinking they collapse ignominiously. We repudiate them because consciously our intellectual understanding has outmoded them. Yet, they still exist, deeply hidden and overlaid and they still influence, if not absolutely determine, our characterizations of Africa and Africans.

Let us examine briefly several of the more notable Old Myths which these fundamental assumptions and stereotypes produced.

First, the African land consists of large masses of dark jungle, surrounded by barren desert, the one fetid and malarial, the other a uniformly hot region of shifting sands. Nowadays we know, or can learn by reading, that less than 10% of Africa consists of rain forests, and that most of the rain forests could hardly qualify as jungle. Although desert lands make up nearly one third of the continent's surface (and indeed sparse rainfall is a problem in much of Africa) very little of the desert actually resembles our stereotype of it: scrub grass grows in many places, there are numerous oases, and people, herding sheep and camels or farming the oases, live over the whole expanse of desert.

The typical African landscape, to the extent that so varied a continent can be typified, is rolling, rather dry prairie or upland woodlands, none of which would be unfamiliar to Americans in the midwestern part of our country.

Second, Africa is widely populated by wild animals, including fierce tigers, which menace the peoples living there. Wrong, we now know: Africa has no tigers, which are confined to Asia, and its declining population of wild animals live mainly in the dry grasslands of eastern, central, and southern Africa, where the tsetse fly creates an inhospitable climate for man and his cattle. Where men live in close proximity to wild game, it is the game that is menaced from omnivorous mankind, not the reverse.

Third, Africans are very strange and exotic peoples. We may not go quite as far as the ancient Greeks and Romans, who spoke knowingly of Africans without heads or as creatures living in holes in the ground, but we all too readily think of the Watutsi, the Pygmy, and the Bushman. Rapidly, however we are coming to recognize that such extremely tall or short men are tiny minorities, that most Africans are about the same size as everyone else, that many of them look like Black Americans, and that many different racial traits are mingled in African populations.

Fourth, Africans have no civilizations and no real history, and have lived in undifferentiated tribal primitivism since time immemorial. Thanks to the growing awareness of the magnificence of African art and music, and to the recognition that there were impressive African empires long ago, at least some of this ancient stereotype of the Old Mythology has been dispelled. We still have some way to go in eliminating this one, but a start has been made.

Fifth, Africans have long lived in a state of savagery, characterized especially in incessant tribal wars and conflict; they were pacified by Europe during the colonial conquest, giving them the first peace they had ever known. This myth has not really been dispelled, it has simply been transmuted into a comparable component of the New Mythology, as will be discussed shortly.

Sixth, Africans lived traditionally in small villages, either with no political organization except that of a vaguely structured chief and elder advisors, or that of a despotic chief who ruled with fear, inhumane punishment, and human sacrifices. Parts of this myth have been swept away; the fact that there were some large African cities, and some African kings with highly structured governments, is coming into acceptarce. Other parts of the myth have been covered up rather than eliminated, so that we still suspect African rulers of despotic tendencies and tend to see traditional African cities as very exceptional.

Seventh, Africans customarily buy their wives, practice polygamy, and have no deep feelings of love between spouses. Parts of this myth have been cleared up, but only parts. We now understand that polygamy is too expensive to allow the large majority of men to have more than one wife, we are beginning to realize that "bride price" is more a form of collateral to protect the rights of husband and wife, and we accept, at least intellectually, that there can be emotional relationships within the African marriage. A noted African king and poet, however, dramatized the African capability of feeling marital love. Writing of his joyful return home, after a campaign in Baguirmi, Muhammad al-Kanemi, the ruler of the Empire of Kanem-Bornu in the early 1800's, sang of his joy of finding alive his wife, who had been reported killed:

"I return to my people, the people of my heart, and the children of my solicitude...But the greatest joy must be told; the joy, oh how exquisite! The recovery of my lost love, a part of myself! Her high and noble forehead, like the new moon, and nose like a rainbow. Her arched eyebrows reaching to her temples, overhanging eyes than which the moon is less bright, as it shines

through darkness; large piercing eyes whose looks could never be mistaken! A single glance at these her all-conquering beauties instantly called her to my mind with all the graces of her disposition lips sweeter than honey, and colder than the purest water. Oh, dearest of my wives! Heaven's own gift what were my sensations when I removed the veil from thy face...When she moves, she is like branches waved by a gentle breeze. Silks from India are less soft than her skin, and her form, though noble, is timid as the fawn. Let this my joy be proclaimed to all my people. Let them take my blessing, and give me congratulation.

Eighth, Africans have traditionally been pagans and animists, with no belief in God or in ethical religions until they were converted to Islam or Christianity by foreigners. On balance, one must conclude that this Old Myth is still with us; we feel more charitable toward Africans and their capacity for higher religious belief, but real understanding of the complexity which really characterizes most African religions, and the fact that most Africans have long had a belief in one God as Creator, has come to only the most studious of us.

Ninth, Africans had no experience with democracy until modern times, when colonial administrators introduced Western concepts of democracy to them. This myth lingers on, as will be noted below, as part of the New Mythology, although we nowadays profess to recognize some vague process of quasi-democracy which existed in pre-colonial Africa as a check on the otherwise despotic authority of chiefs.

As this overly concise balance sheet indicates, we have begun to clear away some of the more absurd and antipathetic elements of the Old Mythology, but some elements remain alive and well. Let us now examine a few examples of the New Mythology, which has given new expression to parts of the Old and has developed a formidable array of more sophisticated new elements.

First, the older image of African tribes engaging incessantly in warfare has been muted, to be replaced by a newer stereotype that the deeply engrained antagonisms among the various tribes lends great fragility and delicacy to the national integrity of Africa's new nations. This is the New Myth that tribalism is Africa's greatest problem. Implicit in it is the belief that the colonial era merely suppressed the traditional state of tribal warfare, but did not eradicate it. Yet the fact is that for centuries before the colonial era these tribes were at peace with each other, were engaged in continuous trade, often cooperated with each other against mutual enemies, and only developed disputes occasionally. Although there is no quantitative study of the frequency of these tribal disputes, one would guess that they were less frequent than disputes among the various nations of Europe over the past millenium.

It is incidentally, helpful to avoid the use of the term "tribe completely, or, if it is not avoided, to use it only with careful definition. African peoples belong to ethnic groups which may range from a few thousand to ten or twelve million, they may live in villages, towns, cities, or dispersed family homesteads, and they may place great or little importance on ethnic ties. The term tribe connotes something that cannot be representative of the way Africans live: is it truly helpful to lump into the one tribal classification the tiny bands of "Bushmen" in the Kalahari Desert and the sophisticated, highly organized Hausa or Yoruba who live in large towns and cities in Nigeria?

A second facet of the Tribalism Myth holds that Africans almost universally place tribal membership above national allegiance; from this we reason that one of Africa's most plaguing problems is that the average African has not yet learned to think nationally. Thus the tragic Nigerian civil war is cited in a thousand sources as the classic example of African tribalism, and constant reference is made to some viscerally rooted hatred between Hausa and Ibo and Yoruba and Ibo, as though this explains the whole grievous problem. The fact is that both Ibos and Hausas have long thought of themselves as Nigerians; there is nothing in African culture that precludes the individual from accepting multiple identities. In the Nigerian Civil War there were far more important causes for secession than what we mean by tribalism: a sectional struggle for revenues, especially from oil; competition for jobs in the North and Lagos; leadership struggles for power. Historically there has been little conflict or even contact between Ibo and Hausa.

Further, most Africans have had long centuries of experience living together as parts of large states and empires composed of numerous ethnic groups. There is nothing totally unfamiliar or intrinsically mysterious to a modern African in being both a Ghanaian and an Ashanti, both a Kenyan and a Kikuyu. (Certainly Africans have no more unique problems on this score than the Scots and the Welsh in Britain or the Flemings and Walloons in Belgium.) Tensions may and do arise in modern Africa when one strong ethnic group attempts to dominate the state and use its resources preferentially for their own benefit, just as happens in Europe, Canada, and most other parts of the world. This universal problem is one which African leaders treat as high priority, but they certainly do not regard it as either unique or insoluble.

It is dangerously misleading to think of the Africa described to us during the nineteenth century and by early twentieth century anthropologists as being the Africa of today. There is virtually no ethnic group on the continent that has remained isolated from the revolutionary changes of the twentieth century. Africans in the remotest areas long for modern products, yearn for education for their children, follow national political affairs with interest, and have a solid concept of their larger national and world environment. In the urban and industrialized areas the average African may well follow current events more assiduously than his American counterpart. African values are in process of radical change, especially in the urban areas, but to a lesser extent in the rural areas as well.

A second major New Myth might be entitled "Africa in Ferment". This ubiquitously used phrase implies that political instability is the order of the day in much of Africa, and that there is precious little tranquility in either national or daily life. Africa thus is imagined to be one large, seething cauldron of peoples, harrassed and confused by fear, unrest, and bewildering change and uncertainty. The facts are quite contrary. Africa is truly in process of revolution, but its revolution is one of broad cultural and economic change that began long ago, even before the colonial era, and will continue for many generations to come. But the changes wrought by the African revolution come in the form of more bicycles and cars, more children in school, more and better medical services, more social cooperation to achieve a better life, more literacy, more people moving to the cities, more cash crops, different techniques of planting, etc., etc. Life goes on with remarkable stability, even when there are abrupt changes at the top level of government. Civil servants continue to man the posts and telegraphs, the highway departments, the ministries of education, and all the other parts of the governmental apparatus.

Riots and violence are rare they are not characteristics of the African revolution. When they do occur, they touch the lives of very few people. Perhaps the African perspective on instability is best illustrated by the concerns they feel about our unrest. To the African his life and environment are stable and peaceful. ours is unstable and unsafe. Many times in the past few years I have been asked by sympathetically concerned African friends about the dangers that we Americans face in our daily lives. They are convinced that American society is in a kind of ferment that makes daily life perilous and troubled: I know more than a few Africans who have seriously questioned the advisability of making a visit to America, so great is their image of our instability. They point proudly to their own lower crime rates, to the orderly pace of life, and to the constructive unity of African views about building a brighter future for themselves and their children.

A third New Myth is that administration and political leadership are something totally new in the African experience, and that the new leadership of Africa is inefficiently fumbling along trying to learn skills that we have had centuries to learn. The fact is that many African administrators have learned rapidly to be sound and capable in their jobs, thoughtful and mature in making decisions. And African political sagacity is proverbial. The grace with which many modern African heads of state and cabinet ministers preside over incredibly difficult problem-solving situations would make their American counterparts green with envy.

We either do not realize, or easily lose sight of, the fact that Africans have for countless centuries channeled their best minds and talents into politics and the art of government, and have built into their cultural heritage a deep maturity of concept and practice. African societies have not had competing fields of endeavor, such as business entrepeneurship and corporate capitalism, to cream off their best men, as we have had. With leadership and government being the most important and prestigeful activities for a man of ability, Africa has had the time and the opportunity to develop the talents of its people in these areas. Modern problems of financing vast developments with inadequate resources, of running new forms of government, and of dealing with perilous international problems may be new, but the personal qualities that enable a man to cope with them are highly developed in most African societies.

A fourth New Myth might be called the "Cold War Myth"; it holds that the unstable and naive new nations of Africa are in serious danger of subversion or domination from communism. Let Tanzania sign an agreement with Peking for aid in building a railroad, and Americans leap to the conclusion that Tanzania has moved a giant step toward membership in the communist bloc. In reality Africans are far more aware and wise in their foreign relations than we give them credit for. Knowing of our fears and suspicions on this score, Africans are either amused or insulted. They, after all, have spent the past few decades freeing themselves from foreign control, and pride themselves, as a result, on being vigilant and sagacious in their dealings with all foreign powers. One of their deepest fears is in having a new foreign master substituted for the old.

Africans follow world developments keenly, and are quite well able to form self-interested judgements about which nations and which ideologies threaten their precious freedom. As uncomplimentary as it may seem to us, many Africans regard the United States, as the self-proclaimed leader of a power bloc that includes all the former and present colonial powers, [and]

at least as threatening to Africa as the communist world, if not more so. They are deeply concerned over the prospect of neo-colonialist domination, recognizing that economic ties and influence may be just as restrictive as political colonialism. To them the American role in Indo-China or in Latin America is very little different from the Soviet role in Eastern Europe: both are seen as evidence that the great powers act jealously to defend their spheres of influence and to expand or maintain their neo-colonial systems.

If proof of the soundness of the African approach is required, there is abundant evidence: not one African nation has "gone communist" since independence. The few that have developed internal policies that borrow from Marxism, such as Algeria or Guinea, have done so intentionally, because of views held long before independence. And these states are by no means under Soviet or Chinese domination.

Those few others which have developed especially friendly relations with communist powers have done so for reasons they deem in their long-term national interest, as in the case of the UAR and its pro-Soviet policy--developed in order to secure massive development assistance and arms for its struggle with Israel.

A fifth New Myth holds African leaders to be corrupt, out of touch with their people, and bent on entrenching themselves into positions of permanent power and privilege. Every case of corruption and autocratic action that appears--and they do, in all objectivity, appear--is greeted with a private 'I told you so, what else can you expect? . The fact is that African leadership is much like leadership elsewhere, not outstanding better or worse. For every African leader who pursues power for the sake of power, there are others who seek power because of an honest conviction that it will enable them to work for the national good.

It is unrealistic to expect African politics to follow the two party electoral system so cherished in Western Democracy, by which loyal opposition parties periodically replace the governing party. African tradition has provided a different way of seeking democratic participation within the one established political framework. In this framework a complex process of decision-making insures, when the system is working effectively, that popular opinion is reflected in the governing policy; a change in the office holders is most often a change in the framework. In modern African one-party systems, which reflects African culture patterns more faithfully than the two party system can, the better systems, such as Tanzania or Zambia, provide for electoral defeat for individuals, but not for the party.

Many African leaders have more than their fair share of humaneness, and spend much of their time consulting with their people in all walks of life, striving to lead by representing, not exploiting. The dramatic walking tours of Tanzania's President, Julius Nyerere, going by foot from village to village, sitting down for serious discussions with people in each one, is a classic example of this effort.

In a number of African countries, with Tanzania and Zambia again being outstanding cases, corruption by leaders is punished vigorously. In Tanzania no political or civil service leader is allowed to acquire wealth while in office; this stringently enforced rule forbids ownership of more than one house, for example.

A sixth New Myth has to do with our image of Africa's extreme backwardness and poverty: we imagine that all Africans live in grinding poverty, suffering from poor sanitation and health, virtually untouched by twentieth century technology. Even when Americans visit the numerous thriving African cities and see modern tall buildings and heavy traffic on sleek boulevards, we look instinctively for the slums and the shanties. Finding them, we are reassured that our image is largely correct. All too often we fail to remember the slums and shantytowns of our own cities, and the harrowing statistics of the number of Americans living below the poverty level. This myth is intimately related to the Old Myth of Africans all living in small villages of huts, which itself never really represented the great diversity in African living patterns.

This is not to argue that Africa can and should be equated with the U. S. in material development or standard of living. Africa's greatest felt need is for major material development, as rapidly as possible. But to understand modern Africa, one must understand that there are many modern cities, significant numbers of middle class people, well developed systems of communication, health, education, and welfare, and properly functioning governmental structures. It is not that Africa has no modernity, or that modernity is alien to Africans, but simply that Africans need and want much more.

Related to this myth is a seventh, the myth of the miraculous effectiveness of foreign aid. As a Ghanaian educational official told me many years ago, when I first went to live in this country, "We like Americans, but find that most have come to Ghana expecting to build the country's first primary school . At that time Ghana had thousands of primary schools, several hundred excellent secondary schools, and two first class universities. Or the foreigner who sees the African farmer patiently hoeing the soil, and insists that a few modern tractor driven plows would revolutionize Africa's agriculture--not knowing, of course, that in most of Africa the topsoil is so thin that a plow would bring up barren soil, and expose the topsoil to erosion.

Naturally professional aid-dispensors are much more knowledgeable and sophisticated. But the fact remains that most westerners who go to Africa continue to believe that their particular prescription for aid is the effective one for curing Africa's problems; Africans, being considered underdeveloped, have a tough time getting a word in edgewise to present their own views of what they need. However, important, foreign aid cannot and will not solve Africa's problems. Only the Africans can do this, by a judicious blend--which only they can achieve--of home based thought and effort with foreign aid. Great progress is being achieved in Africa, but the naive expectation of our aid philosophy that a dollar of aid will produce a visible dollar's worth of development has not been borne out.

There is an eighth New Myth, the myth that beclouds understanding of the relationships between Africans and Black Americans, and between Africans north and south of the Sahara. Both elements are typically held by white Americans and Europeans, who maintain that the differences are too great to consider together North Americans and sub-Saharan Africans, or Africans and Black Americans. Differences are there, and will remain, but similarities and bases for unity and mutual understanding are there in strength.

As for the Africans north and south of the Sahara, even a superficial study of African history reveals the long connections between the two across the Sahara, the well established trade systems, and the unifying influence of Islam. If ancient history is not enough, the common experience of being partitioned and conquered by imperial Europe during the nineteenth century adds a powerful additional unifying force. North African states belong to and are active in the Organization of African Unity; both they and the Black Africans south of the Sahara believe deeply in the necessity of maintaining unity and developing a common outlook on modern problems. They both resent the Western tendency to regard them as separate and different peoples.

As for Africans in Africa and Africans of the diaspora, as it is coming to be described, deep similarities of view and perception of mutual interest exist. The white American dismissal of Afro hair-do's, dashikis, beads, and the study of Swahili and Yoruba reflects white myths more than reality; these and many other efforts by Black Americans to re-discover their identity as Africans stem from compelling roots. Most Africans and Black Americans are just beginning to examine, explore, and savor their common qualities and origins, and this can be expected to grow, not decline. Cultural differences between the two groups are great, and will never disappear. But the bonds of empathy, based on the common experience of being for centuries underprivileged blacks in a white man's world, are at least as important at the cultural differences. Added to the bonds of empathy are the hundreds of culture traits passed on from generation to generation among American Blacks, traceable back to their African origins: soul foods, music, dance, subtle philosophical views, and views of social relationships.

We could go on, identifying more elements of the New Mythology and exploring and rebutting or correcting each. But these few are good illustrations, and they are among the most serious and pervasive. If we are ever to see Africa as it is, rather than as a mythical structure suggests it is, these myths require study and correction. The task is not easy. Recognizing and setting aside deeply buried stereotypical views, each part and parcel of our total cultural inheritance, is an arduous project in its own right. But when these views are constantly reinforced by leading newspapers and news magazines, the television networks, educational publishers, governmental officials, and even some normally authoritative people, the obstacles mount. Yet the obstacles must be overcome, or Africa will remain for us the Dark Continent we perceive it to be, but which it has never been in reality.